

bmj.com news roundup

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Number of uninsured in the United States increases by 2.4m

New figures from the US Census Bureau show that 2.4 million Americans were added to the roll of uninsured people in 2002, but experts say it could have been much worse.

The number of people without health coverage rose to 43.6 million in 2002, or more than 15% of the population. The bureau's report also showed that 242.2 million Americans had health insurance last year, up 1.5 million from 2001. Many Americans lost private coverage because of job losses and a rise in healthcare costs.

The rise in the number of uninsured people could have been much worse—even double what it was—had not public programmes picked up some of the slack, said Leighton Ku, senior fellow in health policy at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Enrolment in Medicaid and the state children's health insurance programme, both of which are government sponsored programmes that provide health coverage to poor people, rose by nearly four million last year.

Scott Gottlieb *New York*

GPs should encourage more HIV testing, says AIDS foundation

HIV testing must be offered more routinely in primary care to identify people with the disease much earlier, says the first nationally agreed service standards for HIV.

The standards, published by the Medical Foundation for AIDS and Sexual Health—a charity partly funded by the BMA that promotes excellence in the prevention and management of HIV—have been endorsed by the Department of Health, the British HIV Association, and the National Association of NHS Providers of AIDS Care and Treatment.



Arranging genes to create art and understanding

These pictures of tulips and tulip chromosomes are from a new permanent exhibition in the genetics department of Guy's and St Thomas's Hospital NHS Trust.

Photographer Gina Glover spent two days a week over five months working with patients and staff to create the exhibition, which was opened last week. It aims to help patients and families understand more about genetic conditions and to provide decorative works of art for the enjoyment of patients and staff. It was funded by the Guy's and St Thomas's Charitable Foundation.

Ms Glover's illuminated photograph *Human chromosomes* (*BMJ* 2003;326:1413) won first prize in the 2003 Visions of Science photographic awards last month.

The depiction of tulip chromosomes is taken from *The Mechanism of Creative Evolution* by C C Hurst, published in 1932.

Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*

Although the health and quality of life of many people with HIV infection have improved considerably since the introduction of appropriate highly active antiretroviral therapy, the number of people infected has also risen sharply, resulting in more people living with HIV infection.

In 2001, almost 5000 new cases were diagnosed in the United Kingdom—the highest annual total since the beginning of the epidemic.

Debashis Singh *London*

Recommended Standards for NHS HIV Services is available at www.medfash.org.uk

GPs protest at plans to publicise their performance

Measures of general practitioners' performance will be made available to the public from

spring 2005, according to health minister John Hutton.

But the BMA's General Practitioner Committee says the plan was never mentioned in the recent contract negotiations.

The statistics to be compiled will measure GPs' performance in treating a range of common chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, hypothyroidism, and hypertension. GPs will be graded not only in terms of outcomes but also on their adherence to good procedure, such as always taking the blood pressure of a patient with hypertension.

New software will automatically compile most of the data. The GPs' negotiators collaborated in the design of the performance measuring system, according to the deputy chairman of the General Practitioner Committee, Dr Hamish Meldrum.

But he says they never expected the raw statistics to be released to the public.

Owen Dyer *London*

FDA chief wants other rich countries to share drug development costs

Trying to make new drugs "affordable, safe, and innovative" is a "global crisis," said Mark McClellan, commissioner of the US Food and Drug Administration, in a speech to the first international colloquium on generic medicine in Cancun, Mexico. He said the United States was paying too high a price for developing new drugs and called for other rich countries to share development costs, perhaps in proportion to their national income.

Developing a new drug costs more than \$800m (£480m; €680m), Dr McClellan said.

"If we do not find better ways to share the burden of developing new drugs and biologics, all of us will suffer. The benefits of these treatments are global," he said.

"Some of the world's richest nations are driving the world's hardest bargains," Dr McClellan said.

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

The text of Dr McClellan's speech is at www.fda.gov/oc/speeches/2003/genericdrug0925.html

German doctor is investigated for killing 76 patients with morphine

A 53 year old doctor who treated her patients at the private Paracelsus Hospital Silbersee in Langenhagen, near Hanover, is being investigated for the possible murder of 76 cancer patients with morphine since 2001.

Suspicions were raised when health insurance companies monitoring patients' files for the past two years found extremely high costs and dosages of morphine without evidence of severe pain and suffering among the patients.

It is not clear whether the patients had wished to die—nor whether the doctor had explained the adverse effects and

risks of their treatment to them.

A court has withdrawn the doctor's licence to practice. She denies carrying out euthanasia, claiming instead that she had understated the severity of the malignant diseases in her records.

Annette Tuffs *Heidelberg*

Court rules that NHS must pay for overseas treatment

A High Court judge last week opened the way for NHS patients who face "undue delay" on hospital waiting lists to have their operation in another European Union member state and claim reimbursement from the NHS.

Mr Justice Munby ruled that "if treatment in this country under the NHS is unduly delayed, then an NHS patient is entitled as a matter of European law to travel to another member state, there to be treated on terms requiring the NHS to reimburse the cost of that treatment."

But he ruled that Yvonne Watts, 72, who had a hip replacement in France, could not claim reimbursement because her case had been reclassified as "soon," with a wait of only three or four months, which was not an undue delay in the circumstances.

Her solicitor, Richard Stein of Leigh, Day & Co, said: "This judgment is a very good one for patients, who will now be able to choose to have urgent treatment earlier by going abroad rather than waiting, often in considerable pain, on an NHS list."

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

Study of London taxi drivers wins Ig Nobel prize

Paper airplanes, Nobel laureates, opera singers, Miss Sweetie Poo, and the Stud Muffins of Science all graced the stage of Harvard University's Sanders Theater for the annual Ig Nobel prize ceremony last week.

The Ig Nobel prizes, awarded to scientists whose work "first makes people laugh—then makes them think," are given to mostly honoured, sometimes insulted, scientists who fly them-

selves to Boston from around the world to receive their "Ig" and explain their work.

For her work showing that the brains of London taxi drivers were more highly developed than the brains of non-taxi drivers, Eleanor Maguire, of the the Wellcome Department of Cognitive Neurology, won the 2003 Ig Nobel medicine prize.

Another winner was Lal Bihari, of Uttar Pradesh, India, who was declared legally dead but lived to receive this year's Ig Nobel peace prize. Mr Bihari was given the award for "leading an active life even though he has been declared—and remains—legally dead." The citation was also for waging a lively post-humous campaign against greedy relatives who had him declared dead in order to steal his land and for creating the Association of Dead People.

C W Moeliker, curator of birds at the Natural History Museum in Rotterdam, won the biology prize for his paper, "The first case of homosexual necrophilia in the mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*" (*Deinsia* 2001;8: 243-7).

Details of this year's Ig Nobel ceremony are at www.improb.com/ig/ig-top.html

Jeanne Lenzer *New York*

Patients should ask more about their medicines, group says

A consortium of three organisations is launching a new initiative next week, called "Ask about medicines." The aim is to encourage medicine users to take an active role in their health care by discussing the safe and effective use of their medicines with a range of healthcare professionals, especially pharmacists.

The three organisations taking part are the Doctor Patient Partnership, the Task Force on Medicines Partnership, and the working group of PECMI (Promoting Excellence in Consumer Medicine Information).

Annabel Ferriman *BMJ*

More information can be found at www.askaboutmedicines.org

Women lose legal fight to use their frozen embryos

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

Two women, whose former partners refused to let them try to conceive using frozen embryos stored before their relationships ended, last week lost their legal battle in the High Court in London to save the embryos.

Natallie Evans and Lorraine Hadley were this week considering an appeal against Mr Justice Wall's ruling that the embryos could not be used without the consent of their ex-partners, Howard Johnston and Wayne Hadley. In the meantime the judge ordered a stay on the destruction of the embryos.

The judge expressed sympathy for both women, particularly for Ms Evans, who sought in vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment after learning she had ovarian cancer. She is childless, and her six frozen embryos represent her only chance to have a child that is genetically hers. She told the judge that having a child was the most important thing in her life.

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990, which governs IVF treatment in the United Kingdom, requires both partners' consent for the storage and use of embryos.

Ms Evans, 31, says that when the consent provisions of the act were explained to her at the clinic, she asked what would happen if she and Mr Johnston were to split up. Mr Johnston reassured

her, saying this was not going to happen.

Ms Hadley, 38, had a daughter from a previous relationship when she married Mr Hadley. She had difficulty conceiving, and she was given a diagnosis of polycystic ovaries.

In 1999 the Hadleys had their first cycle of IVF treatment. Three embryos were implanted, but the treatment failed, leaving two embryos in storage. When the marriage ended soon after, Mr Hadley withdrew his consent to their use.

The women's lawyers used a range of legal arguments, suggesting that it was too late for the men to withdraw their consent because the embryos had already been "used" and that Mr Johnston should be held to his promise that he would not change his mind.

The lawyers argued that the women's right to respect for their private and family life under article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights would be infringed and that the embryos had a right to life under article 2, which should be protected. But the judge dismissed the arguments. He concluded that the only consent allowed under the act was for treatment "together," and neither couple was still being treated together. □



Natallie Evans (right) and Lorraine Hadley outside the High Court